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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses impressions held by Moscow State University (Russia) students about American values. In class discussions and written assignments, students were asked to comment on thirteen values, giving their perceptions of American attitudes in each case. The values included: personal control over the environment; change; time and its control; equality/egalitarianism; individualism and privacy; self-help concept; materialism/acquisitiveness; competition and free enterprise; future orientation; action/work orientation; informality; directness, openness, and honesty; and practicality and efficiency. The results are summarized, with excerpts from student statements. (MSE)

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ED 432 135

American Values Through Russian Eyes

Presented at "TESOL 99," New York, NY March 1999
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This article discusses some curious impressions held by students at Moscow State University regarding values held by Americans. The authors' efforts to identify and contrast important values in both cultures have surfaced distortions, from the Russian perspective, about things Americans consider important and desirable. We expect American perceptions of Russian values will suffer similar distortions. The Russian impressions discussed below may help underline, for teachers of English and others working to promote international understanding, the importance of including culture within the study of language.

Over the last three years the authors have been developing a study of comparative cultural values which will attempt to quantify the intensity of values commonly held by different groups. Julio Rodriguez, President of the Culturelink Group in New York has concentrated on the design and tested survey items with Americans, including his graduate and undergrad students at Lehman college of CUNY. Dr. Olga Zatsepina, who has been teaching English at Moscow State University for the last 24 years, has elicited lists of "cultural values" in the course titled "Cultural Diversity of the Modern World" which she teaches at the International College of Moscow State University. She has used succeeding drafts of the authors' "Values Survey" instrument with her students and, to help them understand the meaning of cultural values, particularly American values, she uses the list in an article by Dr. Robert Kohls in "THE VALUES AMERICANS LIVE BY," Explorations in Modern Culture, Jason & Posner, 1994, Heinle & Heinle Publishers, written in 1984 when he was Executive Director of the Washington International Center of Meridian House International in Washington D.C.

Dr. Kohls notes that most Americans would have a difficult time telling you specifically what the values are which Americans live by. They have never given the matter any thought. Even if Americans had considered this, they would probably, in the end, decide not to answer in terms of a definite list of values. The reason for this decision demonstrates, in itself, one very American value; the belief that every individual is so unique that the same list of values could never be applied to all, or even most, of their fellow citizens. Nevertheless; Dr. Kohls' article discusses key American values and explains why they appear to be of principal importance while, of course, admonishing us to remember what we all should know; that generalizations about a group don't necessarily describe individuals in that group. With all this taken into account, the list proved very important in stimulating students thinking.

In her class, Dr. Zatsepina taught that students should consider that the list of American values could only make sense when seen through the basic beliefs and assumptions of that particular group. They were asked to try to understand Americans from their own value system — rather than from the Russian one. They were asked to withhold negative or derogatory connotations which they might

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Julie Rodriguez

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normal ethnocentrism and youthful self assurance (like students everywhere) they just had to state opinions, express feelings and contrast them against their own values. Their raw expressions form the basis for the content of this article.

Students read the Kohls' article containing thirteen values listed below:

1) Personal Control Over the Environment	8) Competition and Free Enterprise
2) Change	9) Future Orientation
3) Time and Its Control	10) Action/Work Orientation
4) Equality/Egalitarianism	11) Informality
5) Individualism and Privacy	12) Directness, Openness and Honesty
6) Self-Help Concept	13) Practicality and Efficiency
7) Materialism/ Acquisitiveness	

In class discussions, and written assignments they commented on the list. The results were interesting and instructive, though sometimes "way off base." As a matter of fact, most American values were reacted to negatively by the Russian students. Here are some typical ideas that they expressed: (where possible, illustrative statements are quoted directly from student papers with very minimal editing for form, not substance.)

1) Personal Control Over the Environment:

"I interpret this value negatively, mainly due to my religious background. I am not fatalistic but I believe that it is God who prevails. There is something beyond human control. If we have such great control over the environment why do fatal disasters such as hurricanes, tornados and earthquakes occur?"

"Americans don't believe in the power of fate and being called fatalistic is one of the worst criticisms one can receive. What does that mean? In my opinion they simply try to be optimistic, and don't fall under the influence of misfortunes. They tend to avoid misfortunes by keeping control over whatever in the environment might potentially affect them. They evaluate positive changes and have future orientation also because they don't like fixing their minds on bad news."

Commenting on the students remarks we would like to observe that even some five years ago no student would dare to discuss their religion in class. This represents some progress as far as the openness of the Russian students today is concerned. The idea of sharing their religious background is very normal today. While sharing their own values however; the Russian students never asked

others about religion as Russians consider that a very personal matter. Still, many did chose to talk about it on their own. That fact alone is an amazing change in the attitudes and really lack of fear, present in the new generation of Russians today.

2) Change:

In the American mind, change is seen as an indisputably good condition. Change is strongly linked to development, improvement, progress, and growth. For Russians, however, change is fraught with uncertainty, moreover danger, and not a particularly welcome event.

"Change will hardly ever become the value Russians will live by because the majority of changes which took place in the former USSR and later in Russia at first seemed to be good and positive but then, with the time passing they occurred to be negative, for example: "perestroyka", the disintegration of the Soviet Union, etc. Therefore, Russian " change" is usually linked to the increase in prices, dismissals, new taxes or something of that kind."

This unhappy example demonstrates once again how learning not just with words but, with the perception, the reality, the example of every day life. The new generation has associated all the changes taking place during their short life time only with negative and bad things in the lives of themselves and their families.

3) Time and Its Control:

As indicated by Kohls, American's language is filled with references to time, giving a clear indication of how much it is valued. Time is something to be "on," to be "kept," "filled," "saved," "used," "spent," "wasted," "lost," "gained," "planned," "given," "made the most of," even "killed!"

Interestingly enough, this American value was the most criticized.

"My friend told me that when she lived in the USA her friends there planned where to go to spend 3 days in the end of May at the beginning of April. Isn't it boring when you have to plan your life many months before. I plan my work during the week but it is very flexible plan and I have some time free to change."

This is a typical response of a Russian. In the first place, historically, a plan in Russia was something that had to be accomplished at any cost (5-year plans, etc.). Russians still feel the sense of "plan" as a "mandate," a command. They do not sense it as an anticipated route on a map, to be followed only so long as it helps get to the destination efficiently; a path to be modified by experience. Instead, a plan is felt as an imposition.

Then too, with so many changes and unpredictable situations happening every day within the country and in the lives of individuals, it is hardly possible for a Russian to believe that you can plan

a vacation so long ahead, or, for that matter, trust that any future expectation will actually come to realization.

American preoccupation with time was also seen as demonstrating that people are valued well below promptness.

"It seems that Americans are more concerned with accomplishing things on time than they are with developing interpersonal relations."

"No time control can be compared with friendship. Human interaction is no doubt much more important in life."

These comments show how the Russian students oppose time control with interpersonal relations. They believe that with such a tense schedule of living, Americans are limiting their opportunities for more valuable interpersonal relations.

"Exchange students had some experience with that American value. Once a Russian boy was going to meet some friends to go out for pizza. He got busy doing some other things and arrived late. Instead of being happy to see him, they were mad because they had been waiting for him. The boy didn't understand; Aren't the people the important part, not the time? How can I get my friends to adjust to "Russian time"? I think that such ideas about time; the time of arriving to be with friends is not so important but it is the people who are important."

It is very common for the students to interpret Americans behavior as demonstrating lack of human compassion, of caring, of being more "things" than person oriented.

"American people perceive your being late as a personal insult although no offence was actually meant. They are angry with you mainly because they realize they could do a lot of work instead of "wasting time" while waiting for you. It is pure rationalism. Every minute of the 24 hours should be spent for the benefit. It seems to be a non-stop car- racing where there is a fine for the stop. Probably, the Americans feel guilty for doing these stops (even when they are forced to)."

Not all the remarks were critical only of the American values, some scold the Russians a little too.

"In Russia, our "country of wonders," I doubt people have ever thought of time in terms of value. Unlike the Americans we can wait hours for our friend and instead of blaming him we find reasons and good excuses for his being late. It is obviously irrational and may seem even stupid to someone, but that is the way we live; it is a part of Russian culture."

4) Individualism and Privacy:

In the first place it is important to say that the word "privacy" can not be translated into Russian. There are many reasons, considering the history of the country, to explain that fact. The following quotation shows how some students struggle with these values.

"For the 70- years period of time Russian people were taught to value opposite things - collectivism and unselfishness. Moreover, I guess that collectivism is a part of Russian mentality, the way of thinking of the half-oriental nation. That's why when Russians face these traditional Western figures they usually get offended, confused, or perplexed. As it usually happens, condemning the individualistic and materialistic priorities people misunderstand that their point of view was formed by another culture and that's why it cannot pretend to be objective enough. Numerous stories about the Russian students who their American classmates didn't help at the quizzes, or host "fathers" counting every cent spent by the Russian child settled in the family prove the differences in behavior but to my mind, do not say that this value is "good" or "bad." I heard of and faced myself many stories described how tight-fisted, selfish and greedy these "pragmatic Americans" are and how "quick-minded and noble" the Russians, cheating at the exams, with the following words:" 'We (meaning the Russians) never act in such a way!!!!' Let me have my feet cold about the truthfulness of this statement." *[The student has confused the meaning of the "cold feet" metaphor. She meant it to emphasize that she was speaking "coldly," frankly, about the hypocritical posturing of some "quick-minded and noble" Russians.]*

For most Russians the word "individualism" is synonymous with the word "selfishness." It is really a kind of self-interest. From their perspective, every American lives only for himself. When teenagers leave home for college it means, to Russians, that they don't care about their parents and that parents don't care about their kids anymore. From that time on they don't depend on anybody. They try to make a lot of money, to get a profitable job, to succeed in finding valuable friends and as Dr. Kohls writes "think that they are completely and marvelously unique and wonderful". To understand the Russian thinking about this, one should be aware of what has been happening in Russian middle class families.

Kids are taken care of for a much longer time by their parents than in the US. Recently more young people have begun to make some money on their own, but even just five years ago, it was impossible for the majority of them to do so and very often it was the case that parents took care, not only of their own kids, but also of their own grandchildren, who in many cases, live with them. This behavior was taken for granted as the economic situation didn't allow young parents to provide enough for their family to live independently from the parents.

The value of individualism has many components and it is the root of such features of American character as self-help concept, action-work orientation, privacy, practicality and many other.

"Talking about Russia, I would say, that it is uncommon for us to talk about individualism and privacy, because for a long period of time it was even dangerous to express one's point of view, to stand out. The situation has changed but, people don't understand it yet, as the previous behavior turned into value systems and still now people don't respect joint belongings or state property, the philosophy was simple: joint means nobody's, so people don't respect what belongs to others. Now we have great changes in this country, so the crisis will force us to change our old values and to choose,new ones to cope with our problems successfully."

7) Materialism/Acquisitiveness:

"Americans value materialism instead of religion, but indeed they created a new materialistic religion."

A curious phenomenon we have observed is that many Russian students use religion to compare and contrast Russian culture and values against things that Americans hold dear, as if the Americans were substituting secular (base) values for religious values while Russians hold religious values (higher values.) It seems many Russians are unaware that America is a very religious nation but, religion somehow stands side by side with other matters and other interests, even though most Americans belong to some congregation and there are many religions represented in the States. In much of the US, going to a church is part of being a member of a group, of belonging. Some students however; expressed some awareness of this.

"To my mind it is hypocritical to say that Russian people only aim at achieving some spiritual values, that they work for their pleasure, never for money. Maybe Americans are more sincere than the Russians when answering the questions of the survey. Materialism is not bad at all - it is a normal human instinct to get not only moral but financial satisfaction from job."

"Materialism is not specific American value simply the Russians were equal in poverty and decorated it with the ideas of altruism and unselfishness. Now when we fall to obeying rules of the market economy we value the ability to earn more than in the Soviet period because we realize how difficult it is to find a good job. Capitalism made us more pragmatic. May be in 20 years our children will study the same list of Values at the University and will see the American values transferred to the list of the Russian ones."

Materialism is one of the areas most conflicted among Russian students. They seldom openly acknowledge the shift towards materialism that now affects their value systems but, they are constantly examining these ideas; not to difficult to understand considering the internal conflicts that also disturb American youth when materialism and altruism compete.

8) Competition and Free Enterprise:

"It is a pity but competition is not encouraged neither by the people, nor by the government in Russia. It comes from the Soviet times when people were all "the same" and everything around belonged to them. Of course, that was not true, but most of the people even didn't know that there was a possibility to compete. What is the Russian mentality now: " My neighbor has bought a car and I can't buy it. So, I will ruin his car that he won't have it anymore." Such person can not even imagine that there is another possibility: to work harder and to buy a car for himself. IT is a big Russian problem that people don't know how to compete and what is competition".

"To my mind competitive lifestyle has negative psychological influence. Very young children are encouraged to answer questions for which their classmates don't know the answer. It is difficult to

say if this method helps in learning, but it is certainly harmful to interpersonal relationship which matter so much in our life. Competition develops such feelings as envy and self-assurance. In competition a person is very likely to stay all by himself, what cannot even be imagined in traditional societies where everything is shared. There is a Georgian proverb which says the following: "If you have trouble share it with your neighbors and it will diminish. If you have joy share it with your neighbors and it will increase."

All societies evidence contradictions in values. Russian society may have more than its share at this point in time. Russian students recognize that competition, as a value, does help generate an impetus towards accomplishment but, at the same time they see it as a threat to human compassion and connectiveness, a tool for dominance over others and a loss of connection. It is a contradiction neither they nor their American counterparts are likely to resolve very soon.

9) Future orientation:

Students found it so hard to accept the idea of "future orientation," that they tried to deny that it really exists among Americans.

"Dr. Kohls writes that Americans are highly future oriented. However according to my experience with Americans and some knowledge of their culture, I would disagree with his statement of that value. Americans can not value future much due to three reasons. First, future orientation contradicts a widespread in the US religion, Christianity. It is well known that planning for the future is unbiblical. Consider this famous quote from the Bible concerning future orientation." Now listen to me, you that say," Today or tomorrow we will travel to a certain city, where we will stay a year and go into business and make a lot of money". You don't even know what your life tomorrow will be! You are like a puff of smoke, which appears for a moment and then disappears." (James 4:13,14, Good News Bible). *[It is striking to find Russian students quoting from the Bible like this, it could never have happened before.]* So, most of Americans follow the belief that being future oriented is sinful, and, therefore, try to avoid planning a long time ahead and living their life in order to enjoy the future."

"Certainly not all Americans are Christians but they prefer not to concentrate on the future for another reason, which is a supported by a popular psychological theory that "it is wise to live an a compartment of today".This theory basically states that a person should not even take future into consideration. Future doesn't exist. Making the most out of today, living it to the full extent, and facing only the hardships of the current day, that is what many modern psychologists promote in order to reduce stressful conditions among the people. Dale Carnegie, in one of his books written for the audience with no educational background in psychology mentioned that the main method of getting rid of anxiety and extra worry is to forget about future and to start living experiencing the present." *[Dr. Carnegie's books have been translated into Russian and they have became something of a secular (non-religious) "bible" for many people in Russia, especially for business people.]*

"Also, Americans do not devalue the past as Kohls suggests in his paper. Instead, they study their history and keep traditions alive because they are very patriotic. Foreign visitors are quick to observe the prevalence of patriotic symbols: flags in suburban neighborhoods, bumper stickers " I am proud to be American", the national anthem is played at every sport event. National holidays such as Thanksgiving and Independence Day intensify the sense of national identity. Americans do value their past , and therefore can not be highly future oriented."

For many students there is a schism between "future orientation" and tradition or "past" orientation. They find it difficult to reconcile the two, as if one must chose to value the future or the past, never both.

10) Action/Work Orientation:

"Many Americans are addicted to work and leave no or little time for rest and relaxation. I lived in American family for about 10 months and had a lot of opportunities to become convinced of this. Once I asked my American parents, who worked as eye doctors, when they were going on vacation. And was greatly surprised to hear the answer:' We don't have any vacations. It's only a waste of money." Well, I was shocked. This family was not poor at all and could afford a little rest for themselves. Americans live for the future, they think they will have time to relax then. As a result, one can see groups of old American tourists in the streets of big cities."

"It seems to me that an action and a job are the most important words in American Language, at the same time they are the most important issues. " Don't just stand there! Do something!" - this phrase describes "most America's entire waking life". One has to work/act all the time otherwise he is not a typical American man. I do not agree with this value from the point of its being of such great importance. I am quite positive that a person should have some other things in life except work. It seems to me that concentrating on the action Americans lose the " feeling of life".

Russians are put off by the "workaholic" idea since, once again, it devalues human considerations yet, they seem to recognize the importance of work and productive activity — as long as it is within bounds.

"We all like hardworking and highly motivated people who are capable of working efficiently. Yet, everything should be kept within certain limits, and it is the exaggerated role of work that makes a non-American feel somewhat uncomfortable."

11) Informality:

"What the Americans call Informality and Directness I would call rudeness and lack of upbringing."

"Informality exists in their lives and Americans like it a lot because they are one of the most informal and casual people in the world. I think that Informality is just lack of manners: they can wear jeans everywhere, they do not use knives, they call people by their first names. A foreigner may think that Americans behavior is so shocking but in fact it is simply informal. I like that

formality exists in our life because you have to distinguish how to behave, what to wear and what to say in different circumstances."

12) Directness, Openness and Honesty:

Generally Russians dislike what they perceive as — American disregard for the sensitivities of others, for the sake of openly expressing their own opinions. Americans say what they want, when they want. Too much!

"Americans are very direct , when they have to tell someone bad news they always inform people of unpleasant information. They prefer the direct approach. They are likely to be completely honest in delivering their negative evaluation. But I don't think it is good to do that if you don't know how the person is going to react to bad news. You have to take responsibility for unpleasant news."

Then too, Russians attribute a certain amount of what might be considered hypocrisy or perhaps just the influence of changing times to how Americans are expressing themselves in more recent times.

" Based on my experience we can not even talk about directness, openness and honesty in American society today after the concept of political correctness has been introduced to the society. That concept makes people think twice before saying something to save themselves from going to court and being sued."

13) Practicality and Efficiency:

" Americans got used to the thought that they should not do any job without being sure that they will get something for it. They make money out of everything. It can be understood because everybody is trying to get as much as possible, but this can not be a value for me. The value is something that is valuable. So, practicality is more a necessity than a value. There is something you have to do in this life to live well. In Russia we also try to make as much money as possible but it is not a value for us. We still are trying to be helpful and do certain things not thinking of profits. I would rather call a value the intention to do good things and not money making. If they consider practicality as a value, it makes me think of them as callous people, who doesn't care about anyone else but themselves."

These rather conflicted remarks encapsulate contradictions in feelings and ideas of Russian students we have examined to date. On the one hand, they connect "practicality" to greed ("everybody is trying to get as much as possible") and sort of give in to the necessity of being practical but, on the other, they do not want to "own" this value for themselves because they connect it to "callous people," with whom they do not wish to identify.

In considering the students' remarks, we paid close attention to value differences originating from "distorted" understandings of American values (when American children go to college they forget about their parents) and differences posed against values more clearly understood (the tendency of many Americans toward "workaholic" life styles.) In selecting and commenting on student remarks

the authors were aided by our combined experience with Russian and American cultures. We feel as confident about our opinions as anyone can with such complex matters but, there are things we definitely missed and things we need to better understand. Fortunately, as we keep trying, each day peels more skin from the onion.

One of the things we could not determine was the relative intensity of feelings by Americans or Russians about the particular values discussed. Also, we wanted a means to measure change over time, and to be able to obtain more quantifiable profiles of the value preferences of both groups. Both of these measures would be useful in getting a sense of how Americans and Russians really value things and the extent to which they really differ, if at all. We intend to investigate this subject further and expect that the survey instrument we are developing will allow us to quantify responses to these questions. We hope the preliminary results reported here will prove useful to "TESOL" teachers as they orient their own students on cultural values.

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